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SUBJECT: ROYALIST PARTIES STRUGGLE TO FIND THEIR FUTURE

This message is Sensitive But Unclassified.

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY. Fallout from the 2008 elections continues as the royalist parties face the retirement of their stars, defection from their ranks, and questions about their future. Prince Norodom Ranariddh's retirement from politics has shaken his followers and led to defections from his namesake party, but many believe that the Prince's absence will be short-lived. A return to politics may be on the Prince's horizon; whether he can turn that into a new future for the royalist movement remains to be seen. Prime Minister Hun Sen will try to ensure that any future actions by the Prince or his former parties will serve to solidify his own Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) dominance. END SUMMARY.

ROYAL FAMILY ANNOUNCES WITHDRAWAL FROM POLITICS

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**¶2.** (SBU) On October 13, Prince Norodom Sirivudh became the latest royal family member to announce his retirement. He followed the lead of his nephew, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who announced on October 2 that he had quit politics just days after returning to Cambodia from an 18-month self-exile. Sirivudh told the media that the King Father, Norodom Sihanouk, wanted the royal family to abstain from politics in the future. However, Poloff meetings with party faithful and independent observers reveal that many anticipate Ranariddh's retirement to be short-lived. The Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) announced that it would continue to use the Prince's name and image into the next mandate, and a FUNCINPEC official told Poloff that the Prince had reached out to him in hopes of returning. This echoes public statements by other government officials and civil society that Ranariddh may not yet be finished with politics.

ROYALIST PARTIES BLEED MEMBERS

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**¶3.** (SBU) Both FUNCINPEC and the NRP have seen their membership dwindling drastically in recent weeks. More than 20 officials from the NRP defected to the CPP following the announcement of Ranariddh's retirement. Thav Kimhor, the party's former Deputy Secretary General, told the press he felt that NRP politics were no longer sustainable without their founder. Koul Panha, Executive Director of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), pointed out though that the CPP will not be an option for most royalist defectors. In his opinion, the CPP only accepts members who bring some kind of a constituency with them. Following their poor showing in the last election, many royalists lack that prerequisite.

**¶4.** (SBU) Meanwhile, according to local press reports, about half of FUNCINPEC's members are threatening to leave their party for the NRP in frustration over the lack of opportunities available to them in the new government. Ok Socheat, advisor to the President of FUNCINPEC, said that the party had proposed 300 slots for its members, but that the CPP had only allocated 59 positions, plus two advisors. Puthea Hang, the Executive Director of the NGO Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC), speculated that the defectors hoped to gain some of the

positions not yet allocated to the NRP. NRP Secretary General You Hockry denied that so many FUNCINPEC members were seeking to join his party, although he admitted that defectors would likely approach Ranariddh directly for support rather than him.

#### LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS IN FUNCINPEC

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¶15. (SBU) When asked about the future of FUNCINPEC, Ok Socheat opined that without a change in its leadership, the party would remain divided and become irrelevant. The party is split into three factions - those loyal to Secretary General Nhieck Bun Chhay, those loyal to party President Keo Puth Rasmey, and those threatening to defect. Socheat added that Nhieck Bun Chhay feared Prime Minister Hun Sen too much. He said that Hun Sen holds the 2007 raid of a methamphetamine lab on land allegedly belonging to Bun Chhay over him. Socheat explained that if Bun Chhay stands up to the ruling CPP, Hun Sen could bring charges against him for drug trafficking.

#### NRP IN "WAIT AND SEE" MODE

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¶16. (SBU) NRP Secretary General You Hockry explained to Poloff that he had no big plans for his party at this time. He indicated that the Prince had agreed not to act in opposition to the government as a condition of his pardon. It is not clear whether Ranariddh made this deal verbally or in writing. You Hockry feared that if he took any steps that the CPP could view as opposing the Prime Minister, such as siding with the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) on any issue, Ranariddh and the NRP would blame him for violating the Prince's pardon agreement. He said that his immediate responsibility is to

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maintain the structure of the party, and that he could not move in a new direction until he knew Ranariddh's future plans.

#### ROYALIST RECOVERY?

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¶17. (SBU) Ok Socheat of FUNCINPEC proposed that in order for the royalist movement to continue as a viable political entity: 1) Prince Ranariddh must return to lead, 2) the NRP and FUNCINPEC must unite, and 3) the single party must focus on growing their support base from the provinces where they are strongest. He insisted that Prince Ranariddh intends to reenter politics and wants to lead FUNCINPEC again, if Hun Sen allows it and Nhieck Bun Chhay quits the party. He added that while the unification of the royalist parties could be difficult given the bad blood over the Prince's actions when he quit FUNCINPEC in 2006, such reconciliation is necessary. (Note: Ranariddh sold FUNCINPEC's headquarters upon leaving the party and allegedly failed to turn over all proceeds to the party. In the end, the dispute over finances was resolved but not before a court sentenced Ranariddh to 18 months in jail for criminal fraud. End Note.) Koul Panha of COMFREL said he sees Ranariddh rejoining the NRP, rather than FUNCINPEC, and attempting to unite the royalists under its banner.

#### SHAPING THE OPPOSITION

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¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: The royalist parties are in their weakest position to date, and unless Ranariddh somehow manages to return to the political game and unite them, they are past being significant players in Cambodian politics. However, given that the Prince's pardon agreement has granted Hun Sen sway over his actions, any return to politics would likely serve the needs of the CPP, not necessarily FUNCINPEC or the NRP. The Prime Minister might allow Ranariddh to unite the royalist parties to act in coalition as a buffer to CPP's manifest faults and as a foil to the SRP, which means that FUNCINPEC and the NRP face a limited future at best. END COMMENT.

CAMPBELL